

TRIANGLE OF THE DAMNED

Experts are baffled by a string of mystery disasters on the flight path from Britain to the sun

IT'S holiday time, and thousands of Britons are flying south to the sunny Med, to bask on the beaches of Sardinia and Sicily, taste the exotic cous cous of North Africa and explore the Casbah.

And every plane entering the airspace bounded by Sardinia, Sicily and mainland Italy must pass through the Triangle of the Damned.

Commercial flights, charter flights, private planes, even small boats, have all disappeared in the area, which straddles one of the main North-South routes from Europe to Africa, to many of the Mediterranean islands and Southern Italy.

There have now been so many incidents and so few explanations from the Italian authorities that many experts are beginning to suspect a massive cover-up.

The Italian Ministry of Defence, the military forces and air authorities have been involved in investigations. Their attitudes are summed up in one comment from a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence: "We have nothing to say at the moment."

Are they really baffled . . . and if not, just what are they covering up?

The problems of the area first came to world-wide attention on June 27, 1980, when a DC9 of the Italian

domestic air service, Itavia, entered the Triangle.

Within minutes, the plane's controls failed and all radio contact was lost. Then came an enormous explosion, blasting the plane to pieces and sending the crew and all 81 passengers to their death in the sea below.

A year before, it was then revealed, a private Cessna plane had disappeared in the same area. No trace was ever found of it.

The latest known incident was on May 15 this year—the plane was another Italian DC9, flying from Milan to Palermo with a full passenger list and crew. As it entered the Triangle of the

Damned, it started to shudder violently and its instruments went haywire.

Experts said that only an explosion near the aircraft could have produced such a violent shock.

It was not an isolated incident. In the last 15 months, in the same area, there have been official reports of similar near-disasters . . . twice in April, 1981, once in December, 1981, and another in January this year.

AFTER the June 1980, disaster, the first explanation was that a bomb, planted aboard by terrorists, had exploded. Then came the theory that a missile had collided with the aircraft and exploded. Both views had been put forward during the official Italian government investigation, but the crucial evidence came to light when a piece of metal measuring 4in by 1in was found embedded in the body of a passenger recovered from the sea.

The experts agreed that only an explosion outside the plane could have produced that injury.

Are the Italian authorities — perhaps backed by the Americans who have bases and a fully operational fleet in the area—covering up for rogue missiles?

Magistrates investigating the 1980 disaster discovered that there was only one radar system covering the area, and that was operated by the military. Their screens at Marsala, Sicily, had registered the

aircraft plus two streaks that could have been missiles.

When the magistrates wanted to see the recordings of the radar scans they had to put intense pressure on the military to produce them. When the magistrates did see the tapes, they found there was a 15-minute gap after the explosion.

Independent experts claimed that this was odd, to say the least. The reply from the military was that student workers were using the equipment and it was switched off afterwards.

However, the plane went down at night and the students do not work at night.

The narrow escape of the second DC9 this May was witnessed by a military pilot. He reported that he saw an object like a missile flying below the DC9.

But, say the experts, a near miss by a missile out of control, or even another aircraft passing through the sound barrier near the DC9, would never have produced violent vibration on a huge plane, at 27,000ft, in excellent conditions.

The incidents in the air have helped highlight other, perhaps less spectacular, events . . . ships lost at sea, fishing boats found without their crews, captains reporting strange objects in the water.

While the authorities are unable—or unwilling—to explain what's going on in the Triangle of the Damned, other spokesmen are not so reticent.

Renato Minozzi, painter, inventor and Italy's best-